

DISCUSSION¹

UNEMPLOYMENT AND THE POOR LAW COMMISSION

MUCH as we appreciate the talent and industry displayed in both the Majority and Minority Reports of this Commission, they are to us, as eugenists, distinctly disappointing. Neither of them says a word about reducing the number of the "unemployable from birth" by the adoption of Eugenic principles. They have thus missed a great opportunity of instilling into the public mind a most valuable and wholesome truth.

The "Majority" Commissioners may reply in self-defence that blue books are not read by the "man in the street," and that, therefore, such teaching as is suggested would have been thrown away. The excuse may possibly serve in their case, but it will not serve the "Minority" Commissioners, whose aim is much more ambitious, being nothing less than the reconstruction of the State on socialistic lines. Moreover, these Commissioners are directly addressing the "man in the street" by issuing through "the National Committee to promote the break-up of the Poor Law" instalments of their Report in cheap pamphlet form. Their chapter on "Birth and Infancy"—one of those so issued—bristles with administrative reforms, but does not contain a single suggestion or hint for the improvement of the human race by the non-culture of the unfit. It thus ignores the main factor of national progress—the factor of selection for parenthood. In short, the whole performance resembles that of a chess-player who should end his game in ignorance, or oblivion, of the rule that pawns advanced to the eighth square are exchangeable for pieces. The Minority Report assumes throughout that the human pawn must remain a pawn, and can by no exercise of judgment or forethought be converted into anything better.

The appositeness of this criticism becomes apparent when we consider the chapter of the Minority Report headed "The Distress from Unemployment as it exists to-day." This has been changed by the "National Committee" into the more attractive "Disease of Unemployment." Let us see what these physicians prescribe. In an extremely able analysis of the elements of our working population, they show that distress from want of employment is distributable amongst four distinct types of sufferers, *viz.* (1) those whose situations are lost through

¹ This section of the REVIEW is intended to afford opportunity for comment upon articles previously published and upon current topics of eugenic interest.

accidents or changes to which industrial life is exposed; (2) the persons normally in discontinuous employment; (3) the under-employed, who are constantly in a state of partial destitution; (4) the unemployable, who are recruited from all classes of the wage-earners, but most frequently from classes (2) and (3). To this fourth class belong the vagrants and professional tramps, whose "fall is to be sought less in their personal weaknesses or shortcomings, although these co-operate, than in the system of under-employment to which they are condemned." "We have," say the Minority Commissioners, in summing-up the position, "been unable to escape from the conclusion that owing to various causes there has accumulated in all the ports, and, indeed, in all the large towns of the United Kingdom, an actual surplus of workmen, there being more than are required to do the work in those towns even in times of brisk trade, this surplus showing itself in the stagnant pools of labour which we have described, and in the chronic under-employment of tens of thousands of men at all seasons and in all years."

If these are the symptoms of the "disease of unemployment" can there be any doubt of the appropriate remedy? Surely, if there is not enough work to go round, the number of applicants for work should, if possible, be reduced, for no amount of millions spent on temporary works of afforestation, land reclamation or new highways, will afford lasting relief. Instead, however, of 'taking the bull by the horns,' instead of facing the situation boldly and squarely, the Minority Commissioners seem to give up the problem in despair. They tell us that "the task of dealing with unemployment is altogether beyond the capacity of Authorities having jurisdiction over particular areas," and then they proceed to merge the particular in the general, and lay it down as an incontrovertible axiom that success can only be achieved by setting up a "Department of the National Government," with a Minister of Labour at its head (for the present unnamed). Why could not they give us something more practical than a proposal to construct a huge new bureaucratic machine, the functions of which they do not, and seemingly cannot, define? A wise man sees to it that his materials are sound before he begins to build, he does not plan and plot and publish his plans beforehand, leaving the materials to take care of themselves. Social evolution, social reform, works through 'devolution,' and devolution works best when quickened by a sense of individual responsibility. Individualism cannot be destroyed without destroying individual character—and without individual character officialism, centralise it as you will, will prove a costly and a barren product. The aim of the Minority Report seems to be the endowment of mediocrity by encouraging, or not discouraging, the multiplication of numbers without the smallest regard to quality.

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